

A Note on the Controversy between F. Max Müller and W. D. Whitney

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In the course of a study of Friedrich Max Müller, the German-born Oxford philologist who had a great influence on the study of Sanskrit in Japan in the Meiji Era through his three Japanese pupils and whose library was kept for over twenty years in Tokyo University until it was burned in the fire of the Great Kantō Earthquake, I realized that not much attention has been paid to the controversy with William Dwight Whitney, a noted American philologist. This may be the result of lack of the original materials in Japan and of our respect for F. Max Müller. Concerned as it is with fundamental views on language, it still has some meaning to us. However, since it was conducted in various periodicals and newspapers in England and in the States and lasted about twenty-seven years, it requires time and labour to trace its history. In this paper I will present a brief description of the issues and examine the points on both sides in the light of the present view of language. A chronological list of the events and papers related to the subject is given in an appendix.

1

The German Friedrich Max Müller (1823—1900) and the American William Dwight Whitney (1827—1894) resembled each other in age, in the fact that both studied in Germany, and in the close similarity in

their fields of study. On his way home from Germany in 1853 Whitney visited Oxford, where Max Müller had been established since 1846. As Whitney later wrote, Max Müller “had the magnanimity to receive me kindly ... and to aid me in procuring copies of MSS.”¹⁾ This was apparently the only time the two ever met.

Max Müller’s first interest was Sanskrit. He published a German translation of Sanskrit fables, the *Hitopadeśa*, in his twentieth year, and began publication of the *Rig-Veda with Sāyana’s Commentary* in 1849 (publication was not completed until 1873), and the *History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* in 1859. It was expected that he would succeed to the Oxford chair of Sanskrit, but in the election of 1860 he was defeated. This defeat exercised a very decided influence on his subsequent career, for he began to pay considerable attention to comparative philology and delivered two series of lectures on the science of language at the Royal Institution in 1861 and 1863, both of which were published in their year of delivery. These lectures raised him in the estimation of the English public to the rank of the standard authority on philology. Though much of what is contained in them has been superseded, there can be no doubt that they not only aroused general interest in the subject of comparative philology for the first time in England but also exercised in their day a valuable stimulating influence on the work of other scholars.

Whitney, too, was a student of Sanskrit, and it was to collate Sanskrit manuscripts that he visited not only Oxford but also Paris and London on his way back to America in 1853. His reputation stood so high that the following year he was appointed Professor of Sanskrit at Yale. He published *Atharva-Veda-Sanhita*, with R. Roth in 1855–56. From 1860 on he wrote a number of reviews of Max Müller’s publications, such as “On Müller’s History of Vedic Literature” (in *Journal of American Oriental Society*, Vol. 7, October, 1860; in *Christian Examiner*, Vol. 70, in 1861) and “On Müller’s Views Respecting the Relation of the Hindu Astronomy and Chronology” (in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 8, October, 1863). While some of these

1) Letter to *The Examiner* (London), March 4, 1876.

notices are rather complimentary, it is not impossible that his criticism was a cause to Max Müller of unhappy feeling, as a reviewer of *The Nation* later suggested²⁾. However such issues on subjects other than linguistics in general will be ignored here.

2

The controversy between them perhaps began in 1863³⁾ but became serious in 1865, when Whitney published an unfavorable review of Max Müller's two series of Royal Institution lectures. The dispute reached its greatest intensity in 1876, consequent on the publication of Max Müller's "In Self-Defence" in the previous year, and came to a close in 1892 with Whitney's *Max Müller and the Science of Language: a Criticism*.

Whitney's review, "Müller's Lectures on the Science of Language" appeared in the *North American Review* in April 1865. Its subject was the second series of the *Lectures*⁴⁾; his review of the first series appeared later in the same year. Whitney acknowledges Max Müller's status: "In England ... his authority is wellnigh supreme: hardly any one ventures to oppose, or even to criticise with freedom and independence, the doctrine he teaches" (p. 565). But he is not daunted: "We propose to use all liberty and plainness of speech in finding fault with, as well as in praising, what seems to us to call for either treatment" (p. 565). What he finds to praise are the illustrations: "[they] are highly interesting and instructive ... admirably chosen, acutely worked out, and ingeniously applied" (p. 567); though he goes on to add that

2) *The Nation* (New York), March 23, 1876.

3) According to the reviewer of Max Müller's *Chips from a German Workshop* in *The Nation* (New York), March 23, 1876.

4) *Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in February, March, April, and May, 1863*, second series.

they often seem to be introduced more for their own sake than on account of what they should illustrate.

Of the lectures themselves (which he compares both in their “excellences and defects” to the first series) his first criticism is of the looseness of their plan : “There is no thoroughly systematic and orderly presentation of the subject dealt with” (p. 565). He reviews lecture after lecture, giving his criticism and comment. He devotes much of his space to a strong protest against his author’s conception of language. Max Müller holds language to be absolutely identical with thought and reason. Whitney, on the other hand, maintains that language is the instrument of thought, the machinery with which it works ; new words are created, or new meanings given to existing words, when there are ideas which want signs.

His subsequent review of Max Müller’s first series of the *Lectures*⁵⁾ appeared in the *North American Review* six months later, in October. Its key point is expressed in the title, “Is the Study of Language a Physical Science?” In this rather long essay of forty pages, Whitney refutes Max Müller’s assertion that it is. In these lectures Max Müller acknowledges that if language is produced and changed by human agency, its study must be an historical and not a physical science. He himself, however, denies this premise and asserts that while “art, science, philosophy and religion all have a history, language, or any other production of nature, admits only of growth.”⁶⁾ Whitney argues the contrary view, adducing evidence from first language acquisition, offering abundant illustrations to exemplify all the varieties of phonetic change, and showing the causes of word formation. He warns against letting mere analogies drawn from the physical sciences “determine our fundamental views respecting the nature of language and of its study” (p. 471). Language, he roundly asserts, “is an institution ... the work of those whose wants it subserves ; it is in their sole keeping and control ;

5) *Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in April, May, and June, 1861.*

6) *ibid.*, p. 47.

it has been by them adapted to their circumstances and wants, and is still everywhere undergoing at their hands such adaptation" (*ibid.*).

Max Müller made no reply to these criticisms. When in 1868 there was published his Rede Lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge in May of the same year, *On the Stratification of Language*, Whitney reviewed it in the *Atlantic Monthly* in December. He found the title "quaintly inviting" and, in view of the circumstances of its delivery "before one of the great English universities" he expected to find in it "new light upon one of the most engaging subjects of the day—the historical study of language" (p. 762). He mauled the work for its lack of logical connection of thought, closeness of method and cogency of argument.

Max Müller broke silence in the revised sixth edition of *Lectures on the Science of Language* published in London in 1871. In a new preface he replied to Whitney's 1865 review of the second series, accusing Whitney of "unfairness or even stolidity" and condemning the review as a specimen of "over-confident and unsuspecting criticism." Whitney reviewed this new edition in the October 1871 issue of the *North American Review*. Naturally much of his review was taken up with a rebuttal of Max Müller's criticism, in the course of which he twice accuses Max Müller of "ingenuousness or remarkable self-deception" (p. 433 and p. 434). He proceeds again to attack Max Müller's view of the untenability of the view that "reason cannot become real without speech" (p. 436) and charges him with "an utter and radical failure to understand what a word really is" (p. 438).

3

Whitney's next assault on Max Müller lay in a rather different field. After Charles Darwin published his great work *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or Preservation of Favoured Races in*

the Struggle for Life in 1859, the doctrine of evolution, of the connected and progressive development of organic life on earth, became a leading subject of inquiry and controversy in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and in March and April 1873 Max Müller delivered a series of lectures on Darwinism at the Royal Institution. Their published form, *Lectures on Mr. Darwin's Philosophy*, was reviewed by Whitney in the *North American Review* in July, 1874. In these lectures, according to Whitney, "Müller rejects Darwinism, and he lays himself out to demonstrate that it is not and cannot be true" (p. 62); Whitney does not find Max Müller successful in this attempt. He begins by stating the difficulty in considering Max Müller's arguments:

"It is never entirely easy to reduce to a skeleton a discussion as carried on by Müller, because he is careless of logical sequence and connection, preferring to pour himself out, as it were, over his subject, in a gush of genial assertion and interesting illustration."
(p. 63)

But he satisfies himself that Max Müller "appears not to apprehend correctly the meaning of the 'insensible gradation' used by the evolutionists as a factor in their arguments" and "that undoubted and undisputed fact that species do actually vary in nature" (p. 65). Furthermore, Max Müller "seems to mistake the limit between animal intelligence and human reason" (p. 72). He again attacks Max Müller's concept of the identity of thought and language, denying that "articulated language, or language of any kind" is "the only intelligible manifestation of reason" (p. 75). On the contrary, "there is rational conduct as well as rational speech, and it is quite as effective as speech" (p. 75). Finally he consoles himself, "I do not see ... that Professor Müller's lectures are likely to influence the opinions of any adherent of the doctrine of evolution" (p. 83).

In November of the same year, 1874, there was an intervention from a third party: George H. Darwin, the son of the celebrated naturalist, contributed an article, "Professor Whitney on the Origin of Language"

to the *Contemporary Review*. This article falls into two parts. The first part is an enthusiastic support of Whitney's recent attack on Max Müller, the second a defence of his father's view of language against Whitney's criticism, for Whitney's view of the conventional nature of language leads him to deny the possibility of the emergence of language by "insensible gradation."

His edition of the *Rig-Veda* now complete, Max Müller returned to the fray: "My Reply to Mr. Darwin" appeared in the January 1875 issue of the *Contemporary Review*, flanked by contributions from Mathew Arnold and Bishop Colenso, and also in the *Deutsche Rundschau* of March. He claims that Darwin's title conceals that his article is really an answer to his, Max Müller's, lectures on Charles Darwin's views on language, and in turn virtually ignores his own title to devote most of the twenty-one pages of his article to a defence of himself against the criticisms of Whitney. He attempts to minimize the differences between them:

"... the only difference that remains is this—that he ... prefers to class the Science of Language as an historical, not as a physical science. Now, everybody knows that this is a simple matter of terminology. The method of the Science of Language and the physical sciences is admitted, even by him, to be the same. Everything therefore depends on the wider or narrower definition which we adopt of physical science." (p. 310)

"The Science of Language is a physical science, if we extend the meaning of nature so far as to include human nature, in those manifestations at least where the individual does not act freely, but under reciprocal restraint. The Science of Language is an historical, or, as Professor Whitney prefers to call it, a moral science, if we comprehend under history the acts performed by men 'unpremeditatedly, or, as it were, unconsciously,' and therefore beyond the reach of moral considerations." (p. 310)

After dealing with a series of other criticisms against him, he ends with a conciliatory gesture :

“Why is there all this wrangling as to whether man is the descendant of a lower animal or not? Why cannot people examine the question in a temper more consonant with a real love of truth? Why look for artificial barriers between man and beast, if they are not there? Why not try to remove real barriers, if they are there? Surely we shall remain what we are, whatever befall.” (p. 325)

Whitney joined George Darwin and Max Müller in the pages of the *Contemporary Review* April 1875 with an article called “Are Languages Institutions?” (a German translation appeared in the *Deutsche Rundschau* in August). In the first part of this article he restates the views that he had already put forward in his two Max Müller reviews in 1865 and in the second chapter of *Language and the Study of Language* in 1867. “[G]eneral linguistic philosophy,” he says, “must be consistent with the most accessible facts of present living language.” He asserts clearly, “... our words are arbitrary and conventional signs; arbitrary ... because the reason [for the assignment of each word to its use] is only an historical, not a necessary one, and because any other of ... ten thousand possible signs might have been made by us to answer precisely the same purpose; conventional, ... because [the] adoption [of a word] by us had its ground in the consenting usage of our community. There is no way of denying these two epithets to language, except by misunderstanding their meaning.” (p. 717) In language, he insists, “there is involved consenting action of a community, since language is a social institution, and exists primarily and consciously for the purpose of communication.” (p. 719) He concludes: “If these views of language are true, then the marked analogies of languages with institutions are patent and undeniable. A language is a body of usages; it has its main occasion and usefulness in connection with the social life of a community ...” (p. 721)

He then turns to Max Müller’s article in the *Contemporary Review*.

First he charges Max Müller with not having “qualified himself by carefully examining” what he, Whitney, had written. He makes little of Max Müller’s contributions to the science of language: he has not helped “either to broaden its foundations or to strengthen its superstructure”; his views have been “wanting in solidity of basis, and in consistency and logical coherence” (p. 730). He denies that the difference between them is “of that slight character which, in his article, he gives it the air of being— ‘a simple matter of terminology,’ and the like; it reaches to the bottom” (*ibid.*). Where Max Müller identifies language with thought and denies animals the power of conceptual thinking, Whitney believes that “no impassable barrier, but only an impracticable distance” separates man from animals.

“If my view of the nature of language is the true one, the absence of speech in the lower animals is easily seen to be correlated with many other deficiencies incident to their inferiority of endowment Their means of communication is almost wholly intuitive, not arbitrary and conventional, which are the most essential and highest attributes of ours.” (*ibid.*)

Max Müller, he says, holds “that the intellect cannot apprehend resemblances and differences, cannot compare and infer, without the bodily organs to make signs for it” (p. 732). Whitney dismisses this belief in his powerful last sentence: “If this is an exaltation of the value of language, it is an equal degradation of the power of the mind.” (*ibid.*)

On September 4, 1875, there appeared in *The Academy* a brief note of a new work by Whitney, *The Life and Growth of Language*, in which an anonymous reviewer drew attention to some alleged modifications in the author’s opinions. This brought forth in the following issue a reply (dated from “Steamer *Abyssinia*”) in which Whitney denied that there had been any such changes. Though this is not concerned with the controversy with Max Müller, it is perhaps worth noting as an example of Whitney’s sensitivity to criticism.

In its issue of October 9 *The Academy* announced the forthcoming publication of a further volume in Max Müller's series *Chips from a German Workshop*. It was to include a reprint of his "In Self-Defence," which had already been published as Chapter 10 of *Three Lectures on the Science of Language*. It was anticipated that its "piquant justice" would be "thoroughly appreciated by every class of readers."

"In Self-Defence" begins with an attack on "Evolutionism" and proceeds to a summary of Max Müller's Darwin lectures and to an expression of his satisfaction that "the object which I had in view had been fully attained." But this is inevitably followed by a reference to George Darwin's article and with it an outburst directed against Whitney, whom he held responsible for Darwin's article. He expressed outrage against "a gentleman who had acquired considerable notoriety" who "had sent a paper to Mr. Darwin, intended to throw discredit on the statements which I had recommended to his serious consideration." (p. 482 of *Three Lectures*)

"I did not know of that paper till an abstract of it appeared in the 'Contemporary Review,' signed George Darwin, and written with the avowed purpose of discrediting the statements which I had made in my Lecture at the Royal Institution. If Professor Whitney's appeal had been addressed to scholars only, I should gladly have left them to judge for themselves. But as Mr. Darwin, jun. was prevailed upon to stand sponsor to Professor Whitney's last production, and to lend to it, if not the weight, at least the lustre of his name, I could not, without appearing uncourteous, let it pass in silence." (*ibid.*)

The remaining 67 pages of the 76-page essay are devoted to a virulent

attack on Whitney's thought, character and debating tactics. It is essentially a personal attack on Whitney, fuelled by the accumulated resentment of many years. Whitney cannot distinguish "real criticism" from "mere banter, personal abuse or rudeness" (p. 522). His name has become a byword in Europe. "His misunderstandings are ... desperate." (p. 528) He shows "utter absence of any regard for what was, or what might charitably be supposed to have been, my meaning." (*ibid.*) He is now reduced to "whining and whimpering" (p. 534).

Max Müller ends with a list of twenty points "as to simple matters of fact, the principal bones of contention between Professor Whitney and myself"; and he asks Whitney "to choose from among his best friends three who are *Professores ordinarii* in any university of England, France, Germany, or Italy to arbitrate the issues "and by their verdict I promise to abide."

It was, expectedly, not long before Whitney replied: "A Rejoinder," dated December 9 from Yale College, appeared in *The Academy* of January 1, 1876. It is comparatively restrained in tone. He accuses Max Müller of carelessness and of giving "in quotation-marks, as if in my own words, what is in fact only his own version of my meaning," which amounts on occasion to travesty. He denies that he has combined personal feeling with his "object to some of Mr. Müller's views and arguments" and states himself ready "to submit Mr. Müller's twenty points ... to the judgment of *his* personal friends ... if he can find three who are willing to take them into serious consideration."

Max Müller replied to this on New Year's Day. Moved by the courteousness of Whitney's letter, he says, "to an equally courteous reply" he admits that one of his twenty points of contention was based on a misapprehension of the other's meaning: he now clears Whitney of the charge that he "considered the words *light*, *delight*, and *alight* as etymologically connected." The letter appeared in *The Academy* on January 8. Perhaps not unnaturally this soft answer did not turn away Whitney's wrath; instead, it refuelled it and he wrote again to *The Academy*. Receipt of his letter was acknowledged, but the letter itself

was not published. The issue of March 4 explained why :

“... the letter is simply calculated to stir up further bad blood, without contributing a single point towards the final settlement (if such be desired) of the controversy.”

The Examiner, however, had no such scruples and printed a version of the letter in their issue of March 4. Whitney's main objection to Max Müller's letter was, of course, that “he took notice of only a single one of the dozen points which I had made against him, absolutely ignoring the rest”; and he asserts :

“I should ... have very little difficulty in proving to the satisfaction of any fair-minded person ... that the twenty charges fall into four classes : — 1. Those which I can easily refute ; 2. Those which have no pertinence, as involving mistaken and unfair statements ; 3. Those which are too trivial to be worth any reply whatever ; and 4. Those which come under two or three of the heads already mentioned.”

The field of battle then transferred to the other side of the Atlantic, to New York : the March 23 issue of *The Nation* carried a four-and-a-half column review of *Chips from a German Workshop*. It concentrated on “In Self-Defence” and was unremittingly hostile. Written quite unmistakably from within the Whitney camp, it accuses Max Müller of engaging in vulgar abuse and of intellectual dishonesty, falsifying quotations from his own earlier works as well as those of Whitney to bolster his arguments and charging that “Professor Müller's statements of fact [are no] more to be taken on trust than his quotations.” The reviewer is clearly very familiar with the whole controversy. That Whitney had at least advance notice of this review is suggested by the appearance in the following issue of *The Nation*, dated March 30, 1876, of a letter from Whitney in which he refers to the personal attack made on him “in the recently published fourth volume of his *Chips* ... as to the character of which you have clearly expressed your opinion in your

last issue." This letter is dated March 21, that is two days before the publication of the issue concerned. Most of the letter is taken up with quoting the letter not published in *The Academy*.

5

There followed sixteen years of silence, but it was the silence of dormancy. In 1892 Charles Scribner's Sons published in New York a revised edition in two volumes, 12mo, of *The Science of Language, founded on lectures delivered at the Royal Institution in 1861 and 1863*. Whitney, who was now aged 64, returned to the attack and the following year published a brochure of seventy-nine pages, *Max Müller and the Science of Language: a Criticism*.

His pen had lost none of its old vigour. If he has nothing new to say, he says it again trenchantly. Max Müller's views "seem to remain what they were thirty years ago; he has gained no new light upon them from the criticisms that have been made upon his work, nor from studying the discordant views of others" (p. 3). Scorn is poured on his logic:

"His argument may, without doing it any injustice, be succinctly stated thus: philology is, as all agree, a historical science; but the science of language is of a quite other character; therefore the science of language is a physical science. The logic of this is not at all discordant with that of his reasonings in general...." (pp. 24—25)

"The more the work is handled as a student in logic handles a collection of fallacies gathered for him to correct, the more profit will it yield." (p. 76)

He ends on a personal note. He states how he "felt sharply antagonized"

on the first appearance of the lectures not only by much of their content but also by "a style of discussion used throughout which indicated that the author was playing with his subject rather than investigating it seriously" (p. 77). And there is perhaps something rather revealing in his final comment :

"To one living in such an atmosphere of adulation as has been his environment for the past thirty years (fit to sap the vigor of a stronger nature than his), and who has established so tyrannical a sway in British public opinion that even those most opposed to him hardly dare to raise a voice in public against him, it may well enough have seemed that I was playing Mordecai to his Haman"
(p. 78)

This seems to have been the last word. Whitney died two years later. Max Müller did not reply to this final product of his antagonist's pen. By now his interests had turned away from language: the last thirty years of his life were largely devoted to the comparative study of religion, in which he was a pioneer in England as he had been in comparative philology and comparative mythology.

This new phase in his intellectual Odyssey again began at the Royal Institution, with four lectures on the "Science of Religion" given there in 1870. In 1875 he relinquished the active duties of the chair of comparative philology he had held for years and initiated the great enterprise of the publication of the series the *Sacred Books of the East*, of which he was the editor until his death.

6

The controversy between the two great philologists extended, as we have seen, over twenty-seven years, from 1865 to 1892. What, one wonders, provided the driving force for such a prolonged duel, almost

literally a war to the death? Part of the answer may lie in Whitney's temperament. A. A. Macdonell, writing an obituary notice in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*⁷⁾ was "inclined to suppose that his temperament was not altogether lacking in the perfervid element." The obituary notice in *The Athenaeum*⁸⁾ put it rather more strongly: "he was most bitter and sarcastic, though never unjust, when he thought he had to deal with a disingenuous foe." Thomas Day Seymour in the *American Journal of Philology*⁹⁾ regarded these characteristics with greater leniency: "He was heartily vexed by attempts to overlook and avoid the real point at issue. His vigorous spirit may have felt a certain enjoyment in a conflict"

The intellectual characteristic most frequently attributed to Whitney was common sense: "an all-pervading common sense" *The Nation* called it¹⁰⁾. Max Müller was quite other: his temperament had a "poetical coloring."¹¹⁾

"His mind, accurate by both nature and training, shrank from allowing inaccurate statements and false principles to be floated by a charming style. Great Britain in this generation has had more than one scholar of note whose brilliant form of statement, ingenious theories, and varied attainments have sufficed to give them undue authority on subjects where they made some grievous errors."¹²⁾

This last suggests that perhaps national as well as personal susceptibilities were involved. American scholarship was just developing an autonomous existence: *The Nation* still regarded it as the highest praise to say of Whitney that he had "some of the most distinctive traits of German scholars—extreme thoroughness, minute accuracy, mastery of his

7) *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (London), 1894, p. 614.

8) *The Athenaeum* (London), June 23, 1894.

9) *American Journal of Philology* (Baltimore), Vol. 15, 1894.

10) *The Nation* (New York), June 14, 1894.

11) Sidney Lee ed.: *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1901) Supplement Vol. II, p. 154.

12) *American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 15, 1894.

material.”¹³⁾ And although Whitney was greatly respected in England he was not revered as he was on his own side of the Atlantic. This international tension may also have played a part in maintaining Whitney’s unrelenting attack.

But perhaps most of all it was the momentum of history that supported the conflict. Max Müller and Whitney were active at a time when the study of language was just emerging from the matrix of Sanskrit studies. Max Müller turned to philology only when he failed to attain a chair of Sanskrit ; it was as the holder of a chair of Sanskrit at Yale that Whitney developed his interests and it was only in 1869 that the words “and Comparative Philology” were added to the title of his post. Whitney was urging this evolution even further. As A. H. Sayce said, Whitney concluded

“by laying down that glottology is an historical and not a physical science, and by distinguishing between comparative philology and linguistic science. As he very justly remarks, eminence in the one department by no means implies eminence in the other, and he would ascribe the present ‘period of chaos’ in linguistic study to this fact.”¹⁴⁾

In this development of the study of language Max Müller, for all the lasting value of his contribution to the study of Sanskrit, represented, with his anti-evolutionary ahistorical views, the rear guard ; Whitney was in the forefront of the advance guard. “The leading doctrines of [his] system,” as summarized by Sayce, have a decidedly modern ring :

“[L]anguage is learnt, not instinctively acquired, by each successive generation. [I]t is an institution of human origin and invention as much as government or law. [I]t is intended for the purposes of communication [L]astly, the idea must precede the name which

13) *The Nation*, June 14, 1894.

14) A. H. Sayce’s reviews of *The Life and Growth of Language* in *The Academy*, September 18, 1875, p. 311.

is inventend to denote it.”¹⁵⁾

Chapters 9 to 13 of *The Life and Growth of Language* are concerned with what would now be called synchronic studies; and he anticipated the structuralism that dominated American linguistics until the 1950s, not least in his doctrine that “sentences precede words just as words precede letters.”¹⁶⁾

It is no wonder that Whitney was admired by Saussure, who praised “his great originality ...” and said that he rightly emphasized the arbitrary and conventional character of signs in explaining that language was an institution¹⁷⁾, and that later he had a strong influence on Leonard Bloomfield. Regarded in this way, the long controversy with Max Müller is more than an historical curiosity. It is a symbolic drama that marks a watershed in nineteenth century linguistics.

For this paper I am deeply indebted to Mr. Louis Levi, who gave me valuable suggestions for both content and style.

15) *ibid.*, p. 310.

16) *ibid.*, p. 311.

17) Ferdinand de Saussure: *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916), p. 110.

Appendix

Chronological List of Events and Papers

| Friedrich Max Müller (1823—1900) | | William Dwight Whitney (1827—1894) |
|--|------|---|
| • born at Dessau in Germany, in December. | 1823 | |
| | 1827 | • born at Northampton in Massachusetts, in February. |
| • graduated at the university of Leipzig, September. | 1843 | |
| • went to Berlin, studying under F. Bopp and F. Schelling. | 1844 | |
| • published the German translation of Sanskrit fable, the <i>Hitopadeśa</i> . | | |
| • studied under E. Burouf at Paris, with R. Roth and T. Goldstücker. | 1845 | • graduated at Williams College, Mass. |
| • went to England to do research for the <i>Rig-Veda</i> . | 1846 | |
| | 1848 | • directed his attention to the study of Sanskrit. |
| • Publication began of the <i>Rig-Veda with Sāyana's Commentary</i> from Oxford U. P. (finished in 1873) at the expense of the East India Company. | 1849 | • "On the grammatical structure of the Sanskrit" (translated and abridged from von Bohlen) in the <i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i> , Vol. 6. |
| | | • entered at Yale College, studying under E. E. Salisbury, with J. Hadley. |
| • appointed deputy Taylorian professor of modern European languages, in Oxford. | 1850 | • went to Berlin to study with A. Weber, F. Bopp and R. Lepsius (3 winter semesters) and to Tübingen to work with R. Roth (2 summer semesters). |

| Friedrich Max Müller (1823—1900) | | William Dwight Whitney (1827—1894) |
|--|-------------------|---|
| | 1852 | • at the meeting of American Oriental Society, Whitney's paper on "The main results of the later Vedic researches in Germany," read by Prof. Salisbury. |
| • received Whitney at Oxford. | 1853 | • stayed six weeks in Paris, three in Oxford, and seven in London, collating Sanskrit manuscripts. • returned home in August. |
| • succeeded to the full Taylorian professorship. | 1854 | • appointed Professor of Sanskrit at Yale for five years. |
| | 1855 ? 1856 | • published <i>Atharva-Veda-Sanhitā</i> , with R. Roth. (Part I—'55, Part II—'56) |
| • elected to a life fellowship at All Souls College. | 1858 | |
| • published <i>History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature</i> . | 1859 | • made the reappointment 'for life' at Yale. |
| • failed to secure election to the chair of Sanskrit at Oxford, and his attention moved to comparative philology. | 1860 | |
| • published <i>Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in April, May, and June, 1861</i> . | 1861 | |
| | 1862 | • published the <i>Atharva-Veda-Prātiçākhyā</i> , text, translation and notes. |
| • published <i>Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in February, March, April and May, 1863</i> . Second Series. | 1863 | |

| Friedrich Max Müller (1823—1900) | | William Dwight Whitney (1827—1894) |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nominated to the new chair of comparative philology, founded on his behalf, which he held down to the time of his death. • published <i>On the Stratification of Language</i>, Sir Robert Rede's Lecture delivered in the Senate House before the Univ. of Cambridge, May 29. | 1865 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "On Müller's Lectures on the Science of Language" (A critical notice on <i>Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution in February, March, April, and May, 1863.</i> By Max Müller. Second Series.) <i>North American Review</i>, Vol. 100, April, pp. 565—581. • "Is the Study of Language a Physical Science?" (A critical notice on <i>Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution, in April, May and June, 1861.</i> By Max Müller.) <i>North American Review</i>, Vol. 101, October, pp. 434—474. |
| | 1867 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • published <i>Language and the Study of Language, twelve lectures on the principles of linguistic science.</i> |
| | 1868 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Review of <i>On the Stratification of Language</i>," <i>Atlantici Monthly</i>, December, pp. 761—762. |
| | 1871 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "On Müller's Lectures on the Science of Language, 6th ed. 2 vols, 1871," <i>North American Review</i>, Vol. 113, October, pp. 430—441. |

| Friedrich Max Müller (1823—1900) | | William Dwight Whitney (1827—1894) |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • published <i>Lectures on Mr. Darwin's Philosophy of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution, March and April, 1873.</i> • Publication completed of the <i>Rig-Veda with Sāyana's Commentary.</i> | 1873 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • published <i>Oriental and Linguistic Studies: the Veda; the Avesta; the Science of Language.</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George H. Darwin: "Professor Whitney on the Origin of Language," <i>Contemporary Review</i> Vol. 24, November, pp. 894—904. | 1874 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Darwinism and Language" (A critical notice on Max Müller's <i>Lectures on Mr. Darwin's Philosophy of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution, 1873</i>), <i>North American Review</i>, Vol. 119, July, pp. 61—88. • published <i>Oriental and Linguistic Studies, Second Series: The East and West; religion and mythology; orthography and phonology; Hindu astronomy.</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "My Reply to Mr. Darwin" (in answer to G. Darwin's "Prof. Whitney on the Origin of Language" appeared in <i>Contemporary Review</i> of November, 1874), <i>Contemporary Review</i>, Vol. 25, January, pp. 305—326. • retired from the duties of the professorship of comparative philology and entered upon the editorship of the <i>Sacred Books of the East.</i> • "In Self-Defence," Chapter 10 in <i>Three Lectures on the Science of Language</i> by F. Max Müller. September, pp. 473—549. | 1875 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • published <i>The Life and Growth of Language: an outline of linguistic science.</i> • "Are Languages Institutions?" <i>Contemporary Review</i> (London), Vol. 25, April, pp. 713—732. • A brief note on Whitney's <i>The Life and Growth of Language</i> (by an anonymous reviewer), <i>The Academy</i> (London), September 4, p. 248. |

